A methodological comparison of directive speech acts in American and British English: Discourse completion tasks versus conversational data

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The fact that methodology can have a drastic impact on the realisation of speech acts has long been acknowledged in the pragmatics literature. Studies comparing data sets elicited by different methods show that methodology can influence both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic choices of informants (Eisenstein & Bodman 1993, Beebe & Cummings 1996, Kasper 2000, Golato 2003, Jucker 2009). Due to its omnipresence in speech act research, the bulk of studies concerned with methodology in pragmatics have compared data elicited by Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) with several other methods, such as naturally occurring discourse or role-plays. DCT data have been found to be more direct and less complex (Beebe & Cummings 1996 for refusals, Golato 2003 for compliment responses), elicit fewer semantic formulae (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig 1992) and contain more turns and fewer markers of conversational interaction (Golato 2003, Yuan 2001) than naturally occurring data. Whereas qualitative results exist which show differences between methodological conditions, a quantification of these differences has not been attempted so far.

Therefore, the present study is an attempt to understand the differences between DCT and conversational data further and quantify them. It compares the surface realisations of a particular speech act class (directives) across two national varieties of English (American and British English) in two methodological scenarios (DCTs and audio recorded natural conversations). The results show that while DCTs elicit roughly the same strategies as can be found in conversations, their frequency distribution differs significantly. The conversational data are more direct in terms of head act strategy and overall more frequently modified than the experimental data. The distribution of modifiers across the two methodological scenarios also differs in that syntactic downgrading is used more frequently in the DCT data sets than in the conversations. The methodological differences remain constant under the cross-cultural condition. The same methodological differences between conversations and DCTs were observed for the American and British data sets.

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